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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TIRANA 000743

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EUR/SCE - PAUL PFEUFFER, BRAD BELL AND MITCH BENEDICT

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S JULY 11 MEETING WITH PM BERISHA

Classified By: Marcie B. Ries IAW E.O 12958, reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) The Ambassador met with Prime Minister Berisha on July 11

to review requirements for NATO accession and Albania's reform process. The Prime Minister signaled that he understood quite well from his discussion with Assistant Secretary Fried in Croatia that while the U.S. hoped there

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would be a positive signal that the door was open to the A-3 from Riga, there would be no invitations issued. The Ambassador said she hoped Albania would act quickly on the results of the DOD defense assessment, which will be briefed to the PM later in the week. She cautioned, though, that a successful bid for NATO membership depended as much on the strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law as on defense reform. As was the case with Macedonia, elections that met international standards would be critical. (Note: Albania is due for local elections in early 2007. End note) In a subsequent discussion of governance issues, including the impeachment of the Prosecutor General, property restitution, the high council of justice and electoral reform, the Prime Minister stated he would respect the countries' laws and separation of powers and would reach out to the opposition. The Prime Minister also mentioned he is interested in increasing Albania's troop commitment in Afghanistan - possibly together with Croatia and Macedonia, if they are willing. End summary.

12. (C) The Prime Minister recounted the high points of his bilateral meeting with Assistant Secretary Fried at the Southeast Europe Summit the previous day in Croatia. The discussion had been a very positive one: he appreciated very much Fried's comments on Albania's contribution to the GWOT, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and to regional stability. He was gratified that Albania's relationship with the United States was based on a warm friendship and real cooperation.

13. (C) The Prime Minister mentioned he was well aware that the coming months would be crucial ones for the Kosovo status process. Before his recent visit he had not been confident his message of "tolerance" would be received well by everyone but was relieved to find that feedback was positive. He would continue to work hard with Kosovo counterparts to keep them working on making progress on standards issues.

14. (C) He told the Ambassador that his top priority now was NATO membership for Albania. He had underscored this with all of the members of his government and created an inter-ministerial committee for the purpose of making the reforms necessary to get an invitation. There was no question that Albania would devote the required 2 percent of gnp to defense spending. He looked forward to hearing

the results of the defense review supported by the U.S. Department of Defense, which expected would be very helpful to Albania in meeting its MAP commitments.

¶5. (C) In addition to defense reform, Albania was also making progress in increasing security in its ports and on its borders. Albania had been working hard to secure the trust of the Government of Italy and as a result cooperation with Italy in law enforcement and anti-trafficking activities was much improved. Albania was considering beginning helicopter surveillance of its coast and was also weighing the purchase of sophisticated scanning equipment from Switzerland to give it the capability to examine more thoroughly vehicles and containers. The Ambassador noted that security was also heavily dependent on tightly controlling access to ports in particular, and that the Embassy via the ICITAP program was working with the Ministry of Transport on specific plans and training to upgrade port security.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador told Berisha that while defense and security reforms were important, in assessing Albania's application, NATO members would look equally hard at democracy and rule of law issues. There had been some good progress on organized crime, specifically apprehending known criminals, and this had been recognized. But the NAC would also look at, for example, whether the local elections meet international standards.

¶7. (C) The Prime Minister conceded that there was a stalemate on election reform and specifically on voters' lists, which everyone knew had been a problem in the previous election. The opposition had suddenly reversed course and was

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insisting that the temporary lists developed for the Parliamentary elections could not be used. This created a real dilemma since OSCE was projecting that it would take three years to create permanent voters' lists. He thought it a reasonable solution to use the temporary lists one last time. On other electoral reform issues, he was ready to accept all recommendations put forward by ODIHR as well as whatever changes the opposition wanted in the election system. He thought what had been a stalemate on appointments to the Central Election Commission was now on its way to resolution.

¶8. (C) Berisha said he thought the Opposition's strategy was to postpone the local elections. Tirana mayor and Opposition leader Edi Rama had approached a number of people, including small party leaders Ilir Meta and Gjinushi to run in his stead in the mayoral race. Both had turned him down. (Comment: it is general knowledge that the D/P dominates Tirana, making victory for any S/P candidate, even Rama, not a foregone conclusion. End Comment) He thought Rama feared that former PM Nano was calculating he could return to S/P leadership if Rama loses the local election.

¶9. (C) Berisha acknowledged that politics had taken a tough turn but denied they were "hyper-polarized" as some alleged. He said he was aware that there was concern that he was trying to consolidate power under his own office but denied having this motivation. He walked the Ambassador through several examples to make his point. He described the recent reconstitution of the media control board - taken as a *caus belli* by the Opposition - not as an attempt to gain power over the media before the elections but as necessary to properly regulate frequencies and to overcome rampant disrespect of intellectual property rights. It was necessary to have an agency to deal with land distribution vice a *laetary* commission because it needed *asaf* *o* *il* servants and to be organically *lne* *ote* government. The current *commisinh* *s* *4,000* files and has only dealt with *eih* *ecnt* of them. I was obvious

they needed a government commitment behind them. Berisha said he knew that some were saying that he was trying to take control of independent institutions. This was not the case. He was not asking to put the general prosecutor under the control of the government. Appointing the prosecutor was the prerogative of the president. He opposed a secret ballot on dismissal because the Parliament was only voting a report. (Note: the Opposition is asking for a secret ballot in the hopes some of the D/P will vote against and embarrass the government.) The Constitution only allows for secret ballots when the vote is up or down on a person. Berisha did not answer the Ambassador's direct question as to what would happen should the Parliament vote for dismissal (almost certain) and the President refuse to dismiss him.

¶10. (C) Finally, Berisha said he wanted to increase Albania's troop commitment in Afghanistan and possibly deploy a small contingent in Darfur as well. He had asked the Defense Minister to examine whether this was feasible. The Ambassador asked why he wanted to put Albanian troops in Darfur. "We want to be anywhere you are", he said.

¶11. (C) Comment. While the Prime Minister is, in most cases, saying the right things, some of the Government's initiatives are at best hastily-conceived and at worst simply contrary to their own legal framework. We will continue to work closely with the government to try to channel its zeal in the right direction, including engaging the Opposition on matters of broad, national interest. In the last two days the Ambassador has met both with the Quint and the EU/OSCE in the framework of the local "international group," all of whom have agreed on these basic messages.

¶12. (C) Comment cont. On the issue of additional troop commitments, we will seek an opportunity to discuss with the Defense Minister some more details as to what the GOA has in mind. The Prime Minister told us that his first preference would be to deploy in Afghanistan as part of an A-3 brigade and that he will soon raise this issue with his Macedonian counterpart. There is a serious question of where the resources would come for this deployment and whether it would be something which would be value-added in a military sense. Once we have additional details, we will solicit Washington views on whether we should encourage this initiative.

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